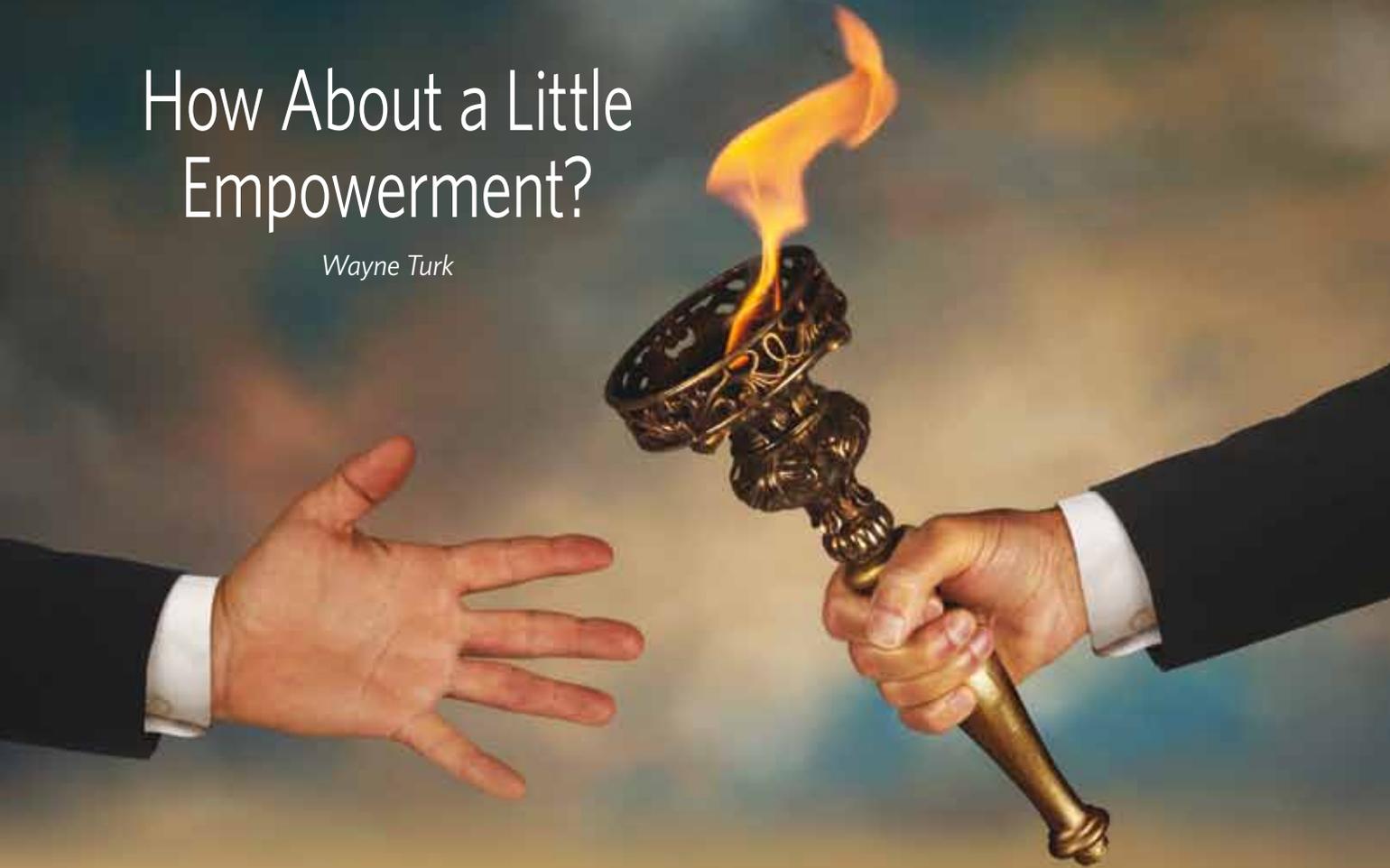


How About a Little Empowerment?

Wayne Turk



Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing an individual to think, behave, act, control his work, and make decisions in autonomous ways. It is the state of feeling self-empowered to take control of one's own destiny in the work environment. Or, as Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, puts it, "An empowered organization is one in which individuals have the knowledge, skill, desire, and opportunity to personally succeed in a way that leads to collective organizational success."

Empowerment has been a big topic in modern day management literature. There are articles on top of articles on top of books written about it. It seems everyone has his or her own steps to take to empower your employees. Naturally, I will do the same in this article, but first, we need to look at what empowerment really is and what it does for you and your subordinates.

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Delegation is Key

Empowerment is directly related to delegation, as I pointed out in "Effective Delegation: A Win-Win Strategy" (*Defense AT&L*, September-October 2009). In fact, if you look in a thesaurus under "delegate," you may find "empower" as a synonym and vice versa. When you delegate, you empower, but empowerment as I am using the term involves more. Empowerment is giving your subordinates the flexibility and capability to make independent decisions and take actions on their own responsibility within certain boundaries. It is a tacit agreement as to what they can (and can't) do without having to come to you, the manager, for approval. The agreement may involve verbal permission or it may be laid out in a policies and procedures manual (or some other written document).

A Manual for Guidance

I recommend creating some kind of a written document outlining policies and procedures. Such a written document is essentially a contract giving employees written permission to take actions or make decisions, and it sets the boundaries for those decisions. A policies and procedures manual provides the written guidelines for empowering employees to independently make decisions and/or take action without the need or time delay of involving management and without fear of being second-guessed or punished for their actions. It also sets out the procedures (or process) for some or all jobs.

A properly developed manual should provide both organizational policies and the appropriate procedures for implementation of the policy. If employees know the policies, procedures, and boundaries, then they will feel confident in making decisions or taking appropriate actions.

Employee empowerment is a challenge for many managers. It involves taking a risk and giving up a degree of control and hands-on supervision. But not allowing subordinates to make decisions or take action when appropriate is an even bigger problem. Organizations need people who can think quickly and who can confidently take action on their own initiative. This is true in both government and industry.

Some Benefits

One of the most visible benefits of empowerment is improved customer service and higher customer satisfaction. Higher customer satisfaction means repeat customers, more business, and higher profits for companies. While profits aren't a government prerogative, for most agencies, customer satisfaction and repeat business is desirable, especially in the acquisition world. Empowerment means that lower-level employees can make decisions while working with the customer. That makes for happy customers, which makes for repeat business and word-of-mouth advertising. Word-of-mouth advertising is powerful, credible, and incredibly inexpensive. Well-treated customers come back again, and they bring their friends; the opposite is true when

they are unhappy. Sometimes they do more than not come back; they blog about their experiences or they talk to the media. While repeat business and profits are much more applicable to non-government entities, satisfied customers and a good reputation should be important to all, including government organizations.

For example, I recently bought a new cell phone and changed my billing plan. I had done some of the process online, but I had to go into the store to get the new phone and switch the number from my old phone (which, by the way, did not make me happy). I had read online that there was a fee for activating the new phone. When I got to the store, the clerk's computer showed that the activation fee was \$8 higher. I explained online showed a different price. After a short discussion, he immediately gave me the lower price. He had the authority to do that. Eight dollars didn't really affect their bottom line, and it made me a happier customer. Examples like that abound, as do the opposite kind of examples in which employees can't make a decision or action without going to the boss first.

The government has researched the benefits of empowering employees. In a 2005 review of 100 workplace studies, the U.S. Department of Labor examined the link between progressive employment practices and improved bottom line results. The Department of Labor found that a positive correlation exists between motivating and empowering employees and significant improvements in productivity, employee satisfaction, and financial performance.

Empowerment is a motivating factor for employees. And motivated employees make for lower turnover and higher productivity. Both lower employee turnover and higher productivity, like higher customer satisfaction, have a positive effect on the organization and its reputation.

A final plus is that empowerment makes your managerial job easier. You don't have to jump in and make decisions for your employees. You don't have to tell them what to do in certain situations. They have been empowered.

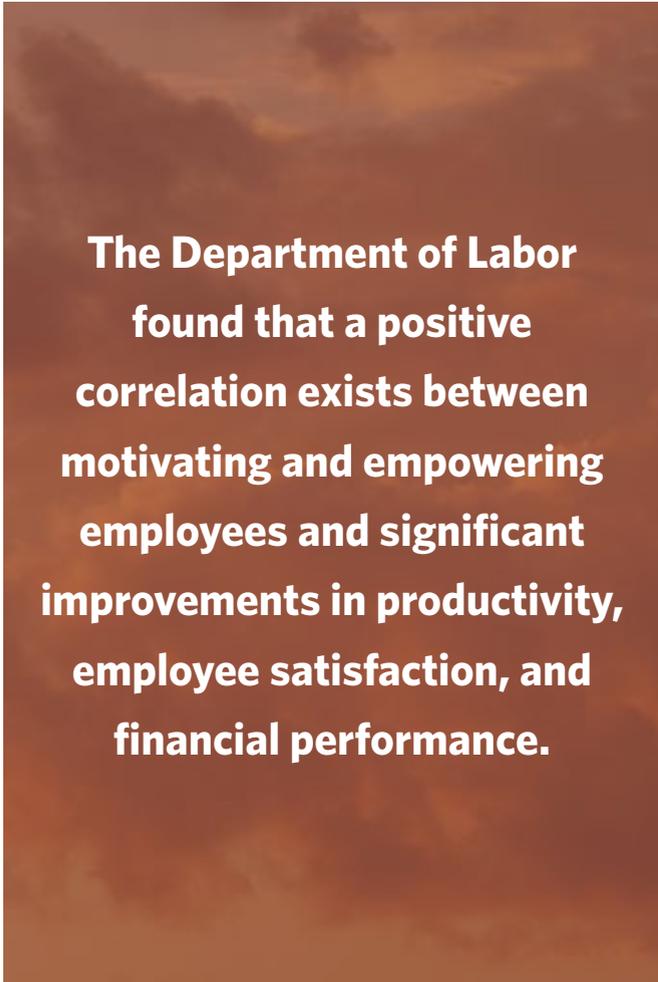
Overall, the more decisions your employees can make, the more productive everyone will be. As the manager, you have more time to focus on management initiatives rather than the day-to-day minutia. Your empowered employees will demonstrate a stronger work ethic and hold themselves more accountable. Because they feel a part of the organization, they make smart decisions to advance the organization's goals and mission. But perhaps the biggest benefit of having empowered employees is the loyalty they show. Employees who are empowered feel respected and valued and are dedicated to making a positive impact.

Steps Toward Empowerment

Here are some suggested steps for empowering your employees.

Communicate

Communicate clearly what your employees are expected to do, what they are allowed to do, the limits, the expected results, and the organization's mission and goals. Most of that should be in the policies and procedures manual. If you don't have one, make that a project. Ensure employees understand their role. Ask questions and ask for employees' suggestions/input. Listen to what they have to say. Good communication is the cornerstone of good management.



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Demonstrate That You Trust and Value People

Your regard for people is visible in your actions and words. Your facial expressions, your body language, and your words express what you are thinking about the people you manage. You want to demonstrate your appreciation for each person's unique value. Trust the intentions of people to do the right thing; make the right decision; and make choices that, while maybe not exactly what you would decide, still work.

Recognize and Reward Your People

Everyone wants to feel appreciated. When people feel truly appreciated, they are eager to take on more responsibilities and they want the organization to succeed. Make it a habit to thank people, even for small milestones. The thank you

could be a simple handwritten note or a big party for a job well done. Also, give rewards when appropriate. The rewards can be tangible or intangible. Find out what types of rewards best motivate your people and dole them out freely for good work and success.

Back Off

Don't micromanage your people. When they know their jobs, you don't want to be looking over their shoulders all of the time. Micromanaging may make you feel that you are on top of things, but what you really do is promote negativity and lost creativity in the workplace. You prove your distrust in the employee when you micromanage. Soon, employees lose interest because you are really doing their job for them. Their morale can go down, they could quit trying, or they could get angry.

Support Your Employees

Don't second-guess your employees. Providing them support is related to demonstrating trust. Show them that you support their decisions. Or, if they make a decision that you don't support, use it as a learning experience, but don't denigrate them. Always listen to your employees and take the time to understand why they did what they did. Too many employees say their decisions and actions are continuously second-guessed and that most of the feedback they receive is negative. Allow them to make mistakes as a form of learning. Show that it is really OK to make mistakes. Of course, too many mistakes are bad for everyone, but that is a different part of managing and training your people. Let them know you really support their decisions.

Solve Problems, Don't Assess Guilt

On a related note to support, you must also help everyone learn from a problem situation. When a problem occurs (and it will at some point), ask what is wrong with the system that caused the people to fail, not what is wrong with the people. Always seek to identify and solve the problem, not to identify and punish the guilty. Share the answer with all of your employees, when appropriate. It might save someone else from making a mistake.

Show Commitment

Stay committed to your word, your principles, and most of all, your people. Empowerment should be constant, not a one-time or once-a-year deal. It should be an ongoing process and promise to your employees. Staying committed will give your employees more confidence and security in what they do, leading to better work on their part.

Now, go out and empower your people. Do it in a smart and effective way. Take the ideas and guidelines here and put them into practice. It will be good for all.

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